

## Unión del Barrio On: *Revolutionary vs. Progressive Educators*

Unión del Barrio

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Since our founding in 1981, Unión del Barrio has recognized the central role education plays in the liberation of our people. In almost 30 years of struggle, Unión del Barrio members has undertaken a series of community-based projects and political programs such as popular education forums, the constitution of the Chicano Studies Councilio, Escuela Aztlan, the Raza/Chicano Studies Program, and the formation of the Association of Raza Educators. From this collective experience and concrete work, members from base Lucio Cabañas and base Paulo Freire have come together to reflect on the distinction between progressive and revolutionary educators. The following is a summary of that discussion, which serves to inform and clarify for the reader how Unión del Barrio sees the role of the educator and his/her relation to the liberation of our people.

### **I. Commonalities between a Progressive Educator and a Revolutionary Educator**

First and foremost, we need to state that revolutionary and progressive educators have, in practice, more in common than difference. But, the differences that do exist are sharp and fundamental. In the course of liberating struggle, these differences become significant.

For both revolutionary and progressive educators, education is founded on the principle that humans are historical subjects who learn best in real-life activities and in close association with other humans. Teachers are facilitators of learning, not dictators. This means that the student must have a voice in his/her education.

Democratic schooling is essential to both types of educators, where the students, parents and teachers, as well as the community, have a voice and are integral to the education process.

Both types of educators subscribe to the belief that education is a science, art (creative activity), and politics.

Both types of educators assume a holistic perspective on education: Art, sports, music, and other non-formal learning activities cannot be divorced from education; without these, a human is not really educated. A truly educated person is one that has diverse skills and knowledges (practical, theoretical, community, survival, etc.). Academics must be incorporated to real-world experiences and activities, where experiential learning is an important component of education.

Both progressive and revolutionary educators are opposed to what Paulo Freire labeled “banking” forms of education, which over emphasizes testing, rote (mindless) learning, and drills. Creativity in teaching is central versus dependency on textbooks and standardized materials.

In addition, both educators value critical thinking and analytical skills, where students draw on

relationships between all subject matter to all things (physical, ideological, and social).

Furthermore both are of the same opinion that education is based on social responsibility, democracy, and egalitarianism (equality). The goal for both revolutionary and progressive educator is that education is crucial to the eradication of all forms of oppression and the creation of a better world.

## **II. Characteristics of a Progressive Educator**

By definition, a “progressive” educator works with a philosophy and set of ideas that would be called “progressive.” Progressive educators believe in social justice and social change. However, what social justice looks like and how it is attained will be different for a progressive educator versus a revolutionary educator. Progressive educators adhere to various kinds of anti-oppressive teaching philosophies, such as critical, feminist, post-modernist, multiculturalists, anti-racist, etc. They tend to believe that change is best achieved within institutions, such as schools. For the progressive educator, the goal of social justice is *reform* of the existing economic, political, legal, educational, and broader cultural institutions in our society. A classic exemplar of a progressive educator is the American Pragmatist and educational innovator John Dewey.

## **III. Fundamental differences between Progressive and Revolutionary Educators**

Unlike the progressive educator, revolutionary educators believe that the goal of social justice is not progressive change or reform, but a total transformation of the systems of domination and exploitation. This total transformation can be termed a “revolution.”

To the progressive educator, community and social activism of the student is important and desirable to education (praxis), but not indispensable. To the revolutionary educator, you cannot educate without social activism. This latter type of praxis is fundamental.

The progressive educator believes in change, but doesn’t see a need to always be active outside pedagogical spaces or the classroom, in the struggle for change. The revolutionary educator believes he/she must be active in social change; otherwise he/she is not a true educator.

The progressive educator believes that he/she can change society through a series of gradual “reforms” in which progressive education is central. The revolutionary educator believes that only a “revolution” can transform the existing social order.

The progressive educator believes that education itself is the vehicle which will bring about democracy and equality. The revolutionary educator believes that the ruling class (capitalist/colonialist) will never allow for a truly liberating education that will end their rule over the masses and bring about democracy and equality. For him/her, the purpose of education is to prepare the masses for revolution.

The progressive educator understands why the oppressed use violence, but will never justify its use. The revolutionary sees the “violence” of the oppressed against the oppressor as a legitimate means/or right of self-defense.

The progressive educator believes that the elimination of the oppressor ruling class can come about through peaceful means, such as through “democratic participation”, and only on rare occasions will force be necessary. The revolutionary believes that mainly through force and rarely through peaceful means, can humans liberate themselves. Revolution cannot be achieved through “non-violent resistance,” but the revolutionary educator recognizes that within a mass-based, organized front, non-violent resistance can be a tactic of the broader strategy for liberation.

The progressive educator tends to believe that the economic background of the student matters, and that a progressive education can overcome the social and economic obstacles in his/her life. The revolutionary educator believes that the victory of the working class (class struggle) and the destruction of colonialism are fundamental to the existence of real education (as opposed to socialization).

#### **IV. Concluding Comments**

Although we understand that under the current system a revolutionary educator would not survive because the system would never tolerate them, one can maintain a revolutionary practice if he/she is organized with others. Our current work strives to unite and organize with other revolutionary and progressive educators. The goals of a revolutionary educator are to overthrow the capitalist system of exploitation and enter into the historical process of transforming the colonial order of the world.

Revolutionary educators propose alternative societies, such as a world where wealth is distributed equitably among all people, the exploitation of workers is replaced with people working under humane conditions, people do not produce for a market but for the people. When their revolutionary task is complete, so too will the needs and social dreams of our people be met because it is they who will determine the content and direction of education. In sum, revolutionary educators are the heralds of a socialist economy and political program.

Our struggle and that of other oppressed peoples, teaches us that revolutionary educators do not become revolutionary simply by reading Karl Marx or Frantz Fanon, but by standing alongside and working with the people who are struggling for their liberation. For example, a revolutionary educator we recognize and whose work we study is Lucio Cabañas<sup>1</sup>. Compa Lucio, through his experiences as an educator in oppressed rural Mexico, came to the conclusion that his commitment to his people went beyond the four walls of the classroom and that only armed struggle would change the dismal social conditions of the oppressed, indigenous working communities of Guerrero, Mexico.

Likewise, Paulo Freire<sup>2</sup>—who was also a progressive educator in both principle and practice—presents us with methods that can lead to the transformation of consciousness. As an organization that struggles for the transformation of society and not simply of consciousness, we believe that Freire’s methods alone are

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<sup>1</sup> A [Lucio Cabañas Barrientos \(December 12, 1938 – December 2, 1974\)](#) was a [Mexican schoolteacher](#) who became a revolutionary.

<sup>2</sup> [Paulo Reglus Neves Freire \(Recife, Brazil September 19, 1921 – São Paulo, Brazil May 2, 1997\)](#) was a Brazilian [educator](#) and influential theorist of [critical pedagogy](#).

insufficient.

In Unión del Barrio, we seek to develop the type of educator that fights all forms of oppression and who understands that these multiple forms of oppression are rooted in capitalism and colonialism. We conclude by saying that educators must be a part of an organized revolutionary struggle for socialism.